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ABSTRACT

This article on grading practices in colleges considers the following issues: the more extensive utilization of nontraditional grades by many institutions, the practices of some institutions of not giving or not recording D and/or F grades, the policy of permitting unlimited repeating of courses with the last or highest grade received used in grade point average (GPA) computation, the "academic bankruptcy" procedure of excluding one or more "bad" semesters, and the lack of comparability of grades from one institution, one department, or one professor to the next. These practices raise serious questions about the manner in which a student's GPA is used to evaluate a student. There is a need for more commonality and equivalence in grading systems so that competition for graduate schools, fellowships, and jobs is more fair. There could be some progress in this direction if all of the departments or colleges in an institution, or all of the state schools in one state, or a national organization could encourage all of its member schools in higher education to work for equivalent grading systems. (SW)

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THE GPA GAME AND THE NEWLY DISADVANTAGED COLLEGE STUDENT

By

Janet Collins & K. N. Nickel

Recently published articles indicate some of the concern over the use of nontraditional grades, newer grading practices, and the higher GPAs in higher education. The following statement on grade inflation taken from one of these articles is a good example of this concern.

> College grade point averages - which have long been used to sort out winners and losers in the competition for graduate school seats, fellowships, and jobs - have risen dramatically over the last decade.[1]

Another discussion on the higher grade point averages that appear to be present in colleges and universities and the greater numbers of A grades that are purported to be given further illustrates the concern. This statement reflects some of the changes in grading policies.

> The Stanford faculty committee that first uncovered the staggering grade point average was appointed four years ago when the university did away with D and F grades and permitted students to take a pass/fail option in any course outside their major.[2]

A third article entitled, "Grading Systems Return to the Basics - Grades," presents another example of the changes in grading practices - to and fro. The policies at one institution were discussed in some detail as the following statements indicate.

> Colorado College in Colorado Springs is a case in point. The college studies itself more than most, and keeps more extensive records. It also went further than most in offering grading options. Students at Colorado may choose either a pass-fail or an A, B, C, no-credit grading system in all courses.
>
> Colorado's "two-track" system began in the 1971-2 academic year. More than half the grades given that year were pass-fail. Last year the ratio was 2 to 1 for letter grades. This year it is 3 to 1.[3]

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It appears from these statements that students at Stanford and Colorado College as well as other institutions with similar grading policies in which no D or F grades are given have an advantage in attaining a high GPA over students in schools which use traditional grading practices which include D and F grades where warranted.

An additional question is posed with regard to grading policies which utilize A, B, C, or no-credit only. Does the meaning of a C grade change when it is the lowest passing grade compared to policies where a C grade is the middle grade in the hierarchy. The criteria for awarding a C grade in these two instances probably vary rather extensively. This difference could add to the opportunity for students at institutions which do not give D or F grades to attain a high GPA when compared to the opportunities for students at schools with traditional grading policies regardless of the student's abilities.

Most of the practices of computing overall grade point averages have been in existence almost as long as the ivy has grown on the towers. However, recent changes in these practices, some rather drastic, affect the statistical computations of a student's GPA so much that students at the schools which have introduced nontraditional practices have a distinct advantage and those students at the "traditional" institutions are put at a disadvantage. They are hobbled and handicapped in the GPA competition - they are the newly disadvantaged!

It is true that much of the future of every student in college depends on her/his GPA to such an extent that a strong concern is generated in many students (and most parents) to do all they can to get and maintain a high GPA. This concern and the resulting emphasis on getting good grades has, in many instances, led to practices which are antithetical to academic standards and real learning - enrolling with "easy" professors, taking snap

courses, cut-throat competition in and out of class, and trying to outguess or outmaneuver the instructor. It seems to matter little what or how much is learned, the grade received and the resulting GPA are the urgent matters of the moment. Learning for learning's sake, open discussion and/or debate, or exploring in several diverse fields all tend to be diminished and minimized by the competition for a high GPA. One author called this competitive exercise "the squirrel syndrome - college students frantically gathering grades for their futures." [4] Others call it the GPA game!

Grading policies not only vary widely between institutions, there are distinct differences within institutions, between departments and within departments, between instructors who teach the same course, and even, at times, between what one professor started the term with and the practice utilized at the end. Some of these many differences are illustrated by two rather candid comments from a study of grading practices.[5]

> There are 18 divisions at the University at last count and each one has its own set of grading and recording practices. There is sentiment for going to one system, but that is doubtful.
>
> We have five undergraduate schools and five graduate schools, and no two have identical grading practices.

It appears from the previous pages that the process of translating information about a student's knowledge and achievement in a course into a grade has neither the equity nor the commonality that comparative evaluations should demand. Is it any wonder that students do all they can to "protect" their GPAs? to play the "game?"

Excellent students in general do not make D and F grades and seldom even make a C. Consequently, they attain high GPAs. However, in some institutions, students with less ability may attain equally high GPAs because their school does not give, does not record, or does not compute D and F

grades into the GPA. Obviously, the more students with high GPAs, the tougher the competition for admission to graduate school, fellowships, or for a good job.

The data from a 1974 study of grading, recording, and averaging practices in higher education provide additional evidence of the disadvantage that many students have to contend with in colleges and universities today.[6] More than 70 per cent (544) of the two-year and four-year schools to whom the survey form was sent returned a usable response. The concern for and interest in grading policies were evidenced by the many comments and the requests for copies of data.

Seventy-seven per cent of those responding indicated that they used one or more types of nontraditional grades to some degree. The types of nontraditional grades that were specified on the survey form were pass/fail (P/F), credit/no credit (Cr/NCr), satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U), and neuter grades such as N or X in place of F, I, or Wd grades. The 77 per cent response on the 1974 study when contrasted with the findings of a 1971 study indicated more use of nontraditional grades. Although the 1974 study did not replicate the 1971 survey, a statement from the report of the 1971 survey assists in comparing these data.

> Forty-six per cent indicated that they were using grading systems which combined traditional and nontraditional policies, and only two per cent stated they were using nontraditional exclusively.[7]

It should be noted that nontraditional grades such as P, Cr, and S are not usually computed into the GPA and grades of NCr or U would not diminish a GPA as would the F in P/F. It is also true that several respondents in the 1974 study indicated that they utilized a different variation of pass/fail (P/F) - they used either pass/no record (P/NR) or pass/no credit (P/NCr) which would not influence a student's GPA at all.

It may be of interest to some readers that the two-year schools included in the 1974 study reported less use of nontraditional grades and that private two-year institutions indicated the least usage. Percentages in the four categories of respondents on the use of nontraditional grades were as follows:

Public four-year institutions 85%
Private four-year institutions ... 88%
Public two-year institutions 65%
Private two-year institutions 45%

Students who attend institutions with only traditional grading practices are not as able to influence or "protect" their grade point averages as are students who have an option to use Cr/NCr grades and other nontraditional choices.

Another aspect from the 1974 study which tends to generate disadvantage to some in the GPA game is the policy on repeating courses. Ninety per cent of the respondents indicated that courses with a grade of F could be repeated, 81 per cent permitted repeating of D and F courses, and 56 per cent allowed repetition of any course regardless of the grade. The modal response for the number of repeats permitted on each of these three categories was "no limit."

The GPA may be changed slightly or dramatically when courses are repeated. Different policies on computing the GPA with two or more grades in one course influence the amount the GPA may change. Is the last grade received in a course that has been repeated the only grade used in the GPA? Some have termed this practice fraudulent and dishonest. Are all grades received when repeating a course included in the GPA computation? Others have called this practice punitive and castigatory. Twenty-nine per cent of the 1974 respondents reported that all grades received when courses were repeated were included. Sixty per cent of the responding schools indicated that the last grade only was used. Many of these 60 per cent responders further indicated that they used the highest grade received rather then the last

grade. When the GPA game is not played by the same rules, some players are disadvantaged.

A policy of not including the grades of one or more "bad" semesters in the GPA computation (so-called Academic Bankruptcy) was reported in 1974 by 4 per cent of the participants in the study. Other respondents expressed interest in this procedure and requested more information. When this policy of eliminating one or more semester's grades is considered along with the reported 8 per cent of the respondents who did not record F grades at all and the 4 per cent that did not record D or F grades and the institutions that reported that they did not even award any unsatisfactory grades, the GPA competition becomes more unfair for those at schools with traditional grading practices only.

In summary, the more extensive utilization of nontraditional grades by many institutions, the practices of some of not giving or not recording D and/or F grades, the policy of permitting unlimited repeating of courses with the last or highest grade received used in GPA computation, the "academic bankruptcy" procedure of excluding one or more "bad" semesters, and the lack of comparability of grades from one institution, one department, or one professor to the next all raise serious questions about the manner in which a student's GPA is used to evaluate a student and/or that student's abilities.

Astin's perception of the grading or credit system as presented in the following statement provides a rather grim perspective:

> The main function of the credit system in American higher education is presumably to translate information about the student's knowledge and achievement into a form that will permit the conferring of appropriate degrees and certificates. These degrees are in turn used by prospective employers and graduate and professional schools to evaluate the person being screened. The credit system, therefore, serves no fundamental educational purpose, but is used rather as a device for sorting and selecting persons for jobs and for admission to some higher level of education.[8]

There is some question that the GPA in the light of the changes and different policies should have the evaluative stature and status it is accorded in sorting out winners and losers in the competition for graduate school, fellowships, and jobs. Can some better procedure for evaluation of student's abilities and accomplishments be found, or, can more commonality and equivalence be introduced into the rules of the GPA game so that the competition will be more fair and the newly disadvantaged college students will be less handicapped?

Since it seems unlikely, even naive, to expect the grading system to be abolished in favor of some other as yet undiscovered system for student evaluation, the question of more commonality and equivalence appears to pose the best alternative. There could be some progress in this direction if all of the departments or colleges in an institution, or all of the state schools in one state, or a national organization could encourage all of its member schools in higher education to work seriously for equivalent grading systems. One author who cited the same 1974 study in his article pointed out the need:

> What is needed is open discussion leading to departmental or faculty-wide resolutions endorsing either a relatively standardized system of meaningful grades or the abolition of all grades.....[9]

One letter writer to The Chronicle of Higher Education ends his epistle with a more caustic comment:

> All the worry about "grade inflation" does is point out the intellectual, social, and moral bankruptcy of those people in the educational establishment too irresponsible to examine occasionally their premises and too arrogant to do a decent job of hiding them.[10]

Obviously, there is no quick, easy way out of this dilemma nor is there any magic solution. Bess indicated a procedure which could be expanded -

> Existing and proposed grading systems should be evaluated within the framework of specific institutional

> objectives. It is only through such an evaluation that grading policies will be established that allow for the attainment of the educational objectives of an institution.[11]

Such a procedure utilized by a national organization with its members in higher education could be the first step in a more general move to an equitable grading system.

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